

## **Gwalia: An attempt to create a national Welsh-language newspaper (by a group of Conservative-supporting gentry and aristocracy in north-west Wales most of whom did not speak Welsh)**

### Political Background

The 1868 general election was a pivotal moment in the political history of Wales. For the first time, Wales sent more Liberal than Conservative MPs to Parliament and never since has the Conservative party won a majority of Welsh seats. The leaders of the Conservative party in Wales – English-speaking, Anglican, aristocrats and landowners – decided that the best way to stem this rising tide of Liberalism in Wales was to establish Conservative-supporting newspapers throughout Wales. Three such newspapers were established:

- *Western Mail* (1869)
- *Wrexham Guardian* (1869)
- *Y Dywysogaeth [The Principality]* (1870)

The Conservative party rebounded in the 1874 election, increasing its representation to 14 seats from 10 but in 1880 fell back to only 4, despite increasing its share of the vote by 2%. The representatives of the Tory aristocracy continued to lose ground – in the Montgomery Boroughs the Williams-Wynn family lost the seat they had held since 1799 and Caernarvonshire, Watkin Williams, the Radical Liberal MP and scourge of Welsh Tories, soundly defeated the Hon. George Douglas-Pennant, the eldest son of Baron Penrhyn. Williams, parachuted into the Caernarfonshire constituency from the Denbigh Boroughs and with no local links to this part of north Wales, turned his rival's majority of 432 into a 1,087 majority for himself with 60% of the vote. The result appears to have been an unexpected and unpleasant surprise for the Conservatives and Douglas-Pennant did not take his loss well, issuing a post-election address in which he described the voters of the constituency as "foremost in falsehood" and stated that "the word of a Welshman can no longer be trusted."<sup>1</sup> Worst was to follow, when Williams resigned his seat within a year to become a high court judge, the new Conservative candidate, (Welsh-speaking) local landowner Hugh Ellis-Nanney, lost to an English-speaking Liberal parachuted in from Liverpool. Faced with these back-to-back defeats by Liberals with no connection with the constituency, the Conservatives of Caernarfonshire realised that it could no longer rely on deference to local aristocrats and landowners to secure their vote in elections. Something would need to be done. The solution, as the local Conservatives saw it, was to establish a Conservative-supporting Welsh language newspaper – *GWALIA*.

### A Conservative Newspaper for Wales or a Penrhyn Paper?

There was already a Conservative-supporting Welsh-language newspaper in existence - *Y Dywysogaeth* – so why in 1881 did a group of aristocrats and gentry

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<sup>1</sup> 'Mr Douglas-Pennant and his defeat', *North Wales Express*, 16 April 1880, 6.

decide to establish a direct rival? Financially, the largest supporter of *Gwalia* was Lord Penrhyn of Penrhyn Castle in Caernarfonshire, one of the richest men in Wales thanks to his ownership of the world's largest slate quarry. Other large financial supporters were his son and heir, Hon. George Douglas-Pennant, the losing candidate in Caernarfonshire in the 1880 election, and their Estate Agent, the Hon. William Sackville West. Other financial backers were men such as Hugh Ellis-Nanney (later 1<sup>st</sup> baronet of Gwynfryn and Cefndeuddwr), William Oakley of the Tan-y-bwlch estate, Col Owen Evans of the Broomhall estate, Major Platt of the Gorddinog estate and, interestingly, one woman, Lady Augusta Mostyn. The vast majority of those putting up funds to establish *Gwalia* did not speak Welsh, Hugh Ellis-Nanney being an exception. The Penrhyn family and Sackville West did not speak Welsh so why were they so keen to establish a newspaper in a language they could not understand?

For the Penrhyn family, the 1880 election result had shown that they were losing control over the political loyalties of their tenants and quarrymen and saw *Gwalia* as a way of persuading them away from Liberalism. So why did George Douglas-Pennant, described as “arrogantly English, ardently Anglican and unyieldingly Tory”<sup>2</sup>, decide that a Welsh-language newspaper, that he and most of his fellow Tory landowners would not be able to understand, would be the answer? Quite simply, if Douglas-Pennant and his fellow Conservatives wished to communicate with the people of north-west Wales, they would need to do so through the medium of the Welsh language. According to the 1891 census, 89.5% of the population of Caernarfonshire and 94.1 % of the population of Merionethshire spoke Welsh. If Douglas-Pennant had any hope of resurrecting his political career and the Conservative cause in Caernarfonshire he would need to do it through the medium of Welsh, a language he and most of his fellow landowners could not speak, but the voters could.

Despite the intention for a newspaper that would be supported by Conservative throughout Wales and circulate throughout the entire nation, *Gwalia* was very much based in north-west Wales, being published in Caernarfon, and most of those who put up the money for it came from the surrounding county. Despite complaints that Wales was full of Liberal-supporting newspapers opposed to landlordism, the Church of England, and Conservatism, the founders of *Gwalia* found it difficult to gather the required capital to start the newspaper, although they eventually managed, with the first issue appearing in August 1881.

In 1883 the newspaper was turned into a limited company and Conservatives throughout north and south Wales (but not outside Wales) were invited to take shares. Again, the vast majority of the shareholders were based in Caernarfonshire with little interest in the investing in the company from elsewhere in Wales.

### Financial problems

At least from 1884, *Gwalia* never made a profit for its shareholders, instead returning monthly losses. The newspaper never achieved its hoped-for circulation of 15,000

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<sup>2</sup> John Davies, *A history of Wales*, London: Penguin, 2007, rev. ed., 472.

copies a week and from 1884 onwards saw its weekly circulation drift steadily downwards from less than 12,000 to below 6,000 by 1889.

In 1887, the directors of the limited company issued an appeal “to the Conservatives of North and South Wales ... [and] all friends of the Conservative cause, and all who desire to maintain the Empire in its integrity to buy the remaining 140 shares in the company. The directors made it clear that “a Welsh Conservative Newspaper cannot be made self-supporting.” *Gwalia* was losing £10 a week and needed a guarantee fund of £520 per year. Somehow the money was found, and *Gwalia* limped on.

### Cross-border Links

*Gwalia* appears have been a newspaper supported almost entirely by the Conservatives of north-west Wales, with some assistance from Conservatives elsewhere in Wales. No Conservatives based mainly outside Wales put up the money to establish *Gwalia* or initially bought shares when then newspaper became a limited company in 1883. By 1887, the limited company commented that of its 178 shareholders in the company, “some” resided in England, but declined to give any names or how many shares they held. We know that the directors of the limited company wrote to prominent Conservatives to encourage them to take shares and it is possible that some appeals to English Conservatives paid off. Still, it appears that relatively little finance came in from the great English Conservative-supporting landowners and *Gwalia* does not appear to have had any Scottish links, perhaps surprisingly as Lord Penrhyn was the Scottish-born grandson of the Earl of Morton. Despite most of *Gwalia*’s shareholders not being able to speak Welsh, living in Wales allowed them to recognise the need to communicate with the voters in Welsh, something not recognised by Conservatives outside Wales.

### Promoting Conservatism

The directors’ report for 1885 stated that they had received “most encouraging reports of the great good the paper is doing politically throughout the Principality”<sup>3</sup>. This suggestion that the *Gwalia* was doing a good job in promoting Conservatism amongst Welsh-speakers was echoed by Lord Dynevor in Carmarthenshire who wrote to Douglas-Pennant in 1885 claiming “Your newspaper *Gwalia* has done an immense deal of good in this County in disseminating Conservative & Constitutional principles among the people. Many farmers who were Radicals are coming over to us”.<sup>4</sup> Writing around 1886, Mr Douglas-Pennant praised *Gwalia* has having “done and is doing good work for the Conservative cause, and much more could be done if it were further developed.”<sup>5</sup>

However, the 1885 election was another failure for the Conservative party in Wales, with its few successes coming in the border area. The Conservatives of north west

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<sup>3</sup> Report of the Directors to the Shareholders at the Third Annual General Meeting to be held on Saturday, May 16<sup>th</sup>, 1885, University of Bangor, Penrhyn Estate Papers, PFA/18/326.

<sup>4</sup> Letter from Lord Dynevor to George Douglas-Pennant, dated 30 October 1885, University of Bangor, Penrhyn Estate Papers, PFA/18/326.

<sup>5</sup> George Douglas-Pennant’s written response to a series of questions, University of Bangor, Penrhyn Estate Papers, PFA/18/326.

Wales who had put up nearly all of the finance for the company saw no electoral return for their money, in addition to no financial return.

### 1890 onwards

I have not been able to trace Gwalia's history any further than 1890 when the Gwalia Printing and Publishing Company merged with North Wales Chronicle Company. The North Wales Chronicle Company Limited eventually produced several newspapers:

- *North Wales Chronicle*
- *Gwalia*
- *The Llandudno Directory and Visitor*
- *Y Chwarelwr Cymreig* (founded 1893)
- *Y Clorianydd* (founded 1897)
- *Chronicl Cymru*

### Was Gwalia doomed from the start?

With the political tide in Wales moving in favour of Liberalism and against Conservatism and the power of the ruling landlord class, was *Gwalia* doomed to failure from the start? Despite seeking to serve all of Wales and circulate throughout the whole country, it was very much focused on the north west. Financially, it never made a profit and was reliant on a subsidy from well-off Conservatives to survive. Even the newspaper retail network was against *Gwalia* with both Douglas-Pennant and George Lester claiming that shopkeepers 'kept back' Conservative newspapers and to promoted Liberal ones to their customers instead and that Conservative newspapers were "looked upon as poison & will on no account be read."<sup>6</sup> This suggests that *Gwalia* was doomed from the start.

### Future research and Links to other nations

Who were the "residing in England" Gwalia shareholders? Where they Welsh transplants or more interested in promoting Conservatism generally?

Is there a Celtic tradition of the local Conservative aristocracy financially supporting a local / regional newspaper? [Linked to Scotland and Wales both being Liberal-supporting counties in late Victorian times]

*Gwalia* claimed to circulate in Liverpool, Manchester, Birmingham, and London. Was there a Conservative-supporting diaspora in these cities?

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<sup>6</sup> Letter from George Lester to R M Biddulph dated 11 September 1886, University of Bangor, Penrhyn Estate Papers, PFA/18/326.